

## **Sermon: In the Beginning Was the Word**

Year B, Second Sunday after Christmas Day

[Jeremiah 31:7-14](#); [Psalm 147:12-20](#); [Ephesians 1:3-12](#); [John 1: \(1-9\), 10-18](#)

Offered January 4, 2015 to Brookline Community Church, Brookline, NH

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Thank you for indulging me. I hope that what I want to show you with today's Scripture passage is a bit clearer because we heard Faure's Pavane, which was the offeratory.

Wasn't it beautiful? I know that not everyone would like it, would chose to play it in their car on the way home. But I think we would all recognize it as beautiful.

Why is it beautiful? This is where you're all supposed to look at me stony faced and have no one make a comment. Perfect. I think one reason it's beautiful is because it fills its purpose perfectly. It was the right length and put us in the mood to reflect on how we feel about God rather than what we say about God because it didn't have any words. And yet, the musicians here are squirming a bit. There's some technical stuff they know about major and minor keys, about symmetry and pacing, about Faure that could give us some insight into why it's beautiful. Finally, today's offeratory was beautiful because it's clear how much Kristine loves it. So the musician's affection for the piece makes a real difference too.

Part of what you ask me to do is to share with you every week some insight into a piece of Scripture. I do my best, and sometimes it helps and sometimes you'd probably be happier and wiser if you'd stayed in bed. This may be one of the week's you wished you stayed in bed, but I want to try something, to try and put into words why the prologue to John's gospel is so beautiful.

So let's look first at how well it does the job it's designed to do. This is the beginning of John's Gospel. How many of you remember basic essay writing skills? Introductory sentence making a claim. The next few sentences were supposed to support the claim, each sentence supporting one part of the claim in the order that the claim was made. Final sentence of the paragraph summarizes the argument. In a longer essay, the first paragraph should lay out the basic elements of the longer argument to follow.

In this prologue, John uses the word "Word" or Logos all over the place. He uses the word "grace" quite a bit at the end. And he never uses either Greek word again in the rest of the gospel. He refers to John the Baptist twice and doesn't refer to Jesus until right at the end. We don't hear about Jesus's birth or death and resurrection. We don't hear about the miracles Jesus performed, or how he healed people or what he taught or how he recruited his disciples or argued the authorities or anything.

For those of you who were here a month or so ago when we talked about the beginning of Luke's gospel, we talked about how the beginning of the story rules some things in and some things out. Honestly with this introduction, I can't find anything that's ruled in or out.

So this must be a pretty lousy way to begin the Gospel. Except it's so beautiful. And the gospel story is a pretty unusual story to tell. Perhaps such an unusual story needs an unusual beginning.

How many of you recognize this shape? It has a name — anyone? Right, parabola. Where do you see it out in the world? So it has a strength all its own. Now let me show you something. I'm going to put the Prologue to the Gospel of John on this shape.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. <sup>2</sup>He was in the beginning with God. <sup>3</sup>All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being <sup>4</sup>in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. <sup>5</sup>The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. <sup>6</sup> There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. <sup>7</sup>He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. <sup>8</sup>He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. <sup>9</sup>The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. <sup>10</sup> He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. <sup>11</sup>He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. <sup>12</sup>But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, <sup>13</sup>who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. <sup>14</sup> And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. <sup>15</sup>(John testified to him and cried out, 'This was he of whom I said, "He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me." ' ) <sup>16</sup>From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. <sup>17</sup>The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. <sup>18</sup>No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

So can we suddenly see symmetry in here that makes the prologue make more sense. But think about Jesus's life and teaching. Doesn't it follow this shape too? And even these spots along the curve? For those of you who were here last week, do you remember from the Gospel of Luke, how Simeon said to Mary that Jesus would be "destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel" and how funny that sounds to our ears. We think of people as rising and then falling. But here is the parabola again.

So maybe part of the beauty of the prologue comes because it does give the overall shape to Jesus' life and ministry.

So what about the other parts, just within the Prologue that make us think it's beautiful. John's trying to share a pretty tough concept, of someone who is fully human and fully divine. How does this not come across as goblegook? I can only share some of the beautiful little details, but if you want more, there are so many in here.

At the beginning of the prologue and at the beginning of the Bible, God creates the world by telling a story, by saying, "let there be light." For God there is no difference between thinking and acting, the Word, or the Logos, is where the two things that are so different for us come together. But that is God whom no one has ever seen. So when the prologue says, the Word became flesh and lived among us, the word and deed are united again and in this world. All of a sudden this world is not some unimportant shadow world where God's actions only flicker across the screen at the very beginning and never again. Everything that is in this world was made through God's words and deed, through the Logos, everything here carries the spark of the divine.

And not only did those words and deeds create everything, they caused things to happen. So the Logos gave us human history. And those who become Children of God are not the ones who step outside this world, who give up on history and only look for higher things. They are the ones who stay right here, focused on the words and actions of the flesh, because that's where the Word appears.

And if that is all too theological and giving you a brain cramp, I get it. Let me show you one little thing that your ear caught, but your consciousness may not have. *The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.* The light shines, present tense. The light is still shining despite all the eternity of darkness that has come against it. And the darkness did not overcome it. The darkness tried and failed. Forever. Great, phew, doesn't always feel that way. Good to know. But when you take the sentence as a whole — <sup>5</sup>*The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it* — it becomes a single fact. They're not two unrelated things. They are the same thing.

There's another place like that, but the translators cleaned it up. We heard *John testified to him and cried out* when what the Greek really says is "John testifies to him and cried out". John is still testifying that Jesus goes ahead of all of us because Jesus was there before all of us. How is he doing that? Through all of us.

Let me give you another nugget, which you may tell me is ridiculous to make any claim for beauty because of it, since I'm going back to the Greek that underlies the passage. In English it says that *the Word became flesh and lived among us*. Only it doesn't actually say "lived" it says "tent." John made up a word. So the Word is with us, not in a permanent structure like a bricks and mortar building, but in something that's easily moveable. In the earliest day of Israel as a nation, the Tabernacle, where the Israelites prayed as they journeyed from Egypt to Israel, was a tent. When you believe in a sacred space that can move around, it means that no one spot is holy. The whole world is sacred.

One last note, right at the end of prologue. It's not explicit, it's implicit, but I think if I point it out it will make what John's doing even more startling. At the very end of the prologue John says, <sup>18</sup>*No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.* How does Jesus make God known? John's answer is to read the read of his gospel. Jesus' whole life urged all of us to behold the glory of God in this world, through the poor and the weak, through caring for the community, through loving our neighbor. Faith comes later, words and actions come first. Read the gospel it says. Act first, take in the words. Don't worry so much about what you believe or if you believe. The Word is here in the world, showing the God that is unseeable.

Maybe the parabola is fine and fancy, but not too compelling. Maybe all the technical nuances are neat and obviously I dig them, but half the points I made were about what was in the original Greek which no one, including me, is going to read. Maybe I'm just pulling a hamstring to make there be something here that's just not there.

But it's still beautiful. For so many people this passage is just so beautiful.

Perhaps in the end the beauty comes because of how much the Evangelist loved God and wanted to share that love with everyone. It conveys the truth that the Evangelist understood in a way that cannot be factual, because, after all John wasn't there before the world was made, but in other ways is completely true. Maybe all its beauty just come from that love. That love that we all share, at one point another, that love that draws us here together on a snowy morning.

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